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SUBJECT: NORTH BABIL SHEIKHS APPEAL FOR U.S. HELP ON SECURITY, JOBS

REF: HILLAH 147

HILLAH 00000148 001.2 OF 002

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REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶11. (C) Summary: A group of Sunni tribal leaders and activists from north Babil view American intervention as their best hope to address unemployment in their area, stabilize Iraq's security situation and promote expression of moderate political views. According to a subsequent communication from one member of the group, their own personal security worries have intensified following the assassination of the head of the Hillah SWAT team (reftel), as a result of which they now fear that Shi'a death squads may have them in their sights. End summary.

¶12. (C) Led by a retired Air Force pilot, Gen. 'Iyad Hatif, approximately ten leaders of Sunni tribes from the northern part of Babil Province and several political activists converged on the Regional Embassy Office (REO) on Oct. 7 to present a list of concerns to the Regional Coordinator (RC), IPAO and a representative of 2BCT/4ID based at the REO. The meeting resulted from a request to the RC by Dr. Laith Al-'Ulwani, a civil society activist, at the REO-hosted iftar three days earlier. Dr. Laith accompanied the group but mainly let others do the talking. Several of the sheikhs were careful to note that although they themselves are residents of Babil, their tribesmen live all over Iraq.

SECURITY CONCERN

¶13. (C) Gen. 'Iyad kicked off the discussion with an overview of Babil's security, hailing the work of the Iraqi police and army for keeping the province stable compared to others. He also noted the significant contributions of tribal leaders in this regard. However, he maintained, sheikhs will need assistance to continue to play an effective and positive leadership role. Political and economic factors are having negative repercussions on the security front, in his analysis, and causing people to abandon traditional pillars of their social structure, such as the tribal hierarchy, in favor of leaders who draw on other types of loyalties.

GET JOBS FOR THE YOUNG PEOPLE

¶14. (C) Once Gen. 'Iyad called on the sheikhs one by one to speak, they confined their initial remarks to economic matters. A growing population of jobless young men is providing ready

recruits for troublemakers, they said, and the Americans should get involved to help reduce unemployment. One proposal was to provide retirement funds so that older workers can step aside and give the younger labor force a chance to be hired.

Deportation of foreigners working in Iraq but not married to Iraqis was among the more outlandish other suggestions they made, though one of their number pointed out that many foreigners had lived here so long and given so much to the country that they should be considered honorary Iraqis.

¶5. (C) The men also repeated bitterly a complaint the Babil Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) has previously heard on numerous occasions from Dr. Laith, namely that north Babil has not received its fair share of reconstruction projects. Reconstruction work in the province's northern areas had never been able to get off the ground because of security concerns, they claimed, and what projects had been carried out were tainted because contracts went to corrupt leaders and people with "dirty hands." (Note: According to PRT statistics, the two districts of north Babil have actually received more project funds per capita than the province's other two districts. End note.)

NEED BETTER ARMY, REPRESENTATIVES

¶6. (C) The group also advocated bringing former Iraqi army personnel back into the security forces as a means of improving both employment rates and security. Notwithstanding this desire, the sheikhs are looking to the U.S. to ensure border security for the country. They particularly fear Iranian infiltration but believe that anyone wanting to disrupt Iraq's progress can come in relatively easily from any direction and do so. The deployment of the Iraqi army contributes to the problem, in their view, by leaving many areas unguarded and open for use as bases for nefarious operations. Moreover, were the security forces to fall under the sway of a given political current, they said, the results would be very bad for the

HILLAH 00000148 002.2 OF 002

province and particularly for its Sunni residents concentrated in the north.

¶7. (C) The next target for the sheikhs' displeasure was the Babil Provincial Council (PC). Again taking up the allegation of a lack of reconstruction projects, they posited that the PC does not care about north Babil in the least. Lacking adequate representation in the province's legislative or executive branches, the group asked for the U.S. to bring political moderates together to chart a way forward. The RC rejoined that dialogue seeking peaceful resolution of problems is inherently desirable, but Iraqis must take the lead in shaping their political processes and institutions. Unreceptive to this message, the sheikhs clung to the belief that, as one of them put it, the U.S. had broken Iraq and is now obligated to fix it.

AFTERWARDS, MORE WORRIES

¶8. (C) Dr. Laith reiterated the group's security concerns in a phone call to a REO local employee following the Oct. 13 assassination of Al-Hillah SWAT leader Col. Salam Al-Ma'mouri (reftel). If Maj. Ali Hamid Abbas takes over the SWAT team per the instructions from the office of the Prime Minister, said Dr. Laith (who asked to have his views communicated to higher levels), it would not be long before he and some of the other men who attended the Oct. 7 meeting would find themselves the targets of Shi'a death squads.

COMMENT

¶9. (C) The tone of the sheikhs' comments was respectful even when the discussion grew mildly accusatory, and they conveyed an

almost touching degree of faith that the U.S. can make things better if only it puts its mind to it. By the same token there was no small measure of irony in some of what they had to say. The poor representation on the Provincial Council they lamented, for instance, became all but inevitable when the Sunnis boycotted elections. In the end, however, it is difficult to argue with their contention that their region's security bears watching. The province's police chief, MG Qais Al-Ma'mouri (whom Gen. 'Iyad praised by name), would surely agree: less than 24 hours after this meeting, he survived yet another assassination attempt - in Iskandiriya, to the north near Babil's border with Baghdad.

HUNTER